A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 43

Two Jedi had defected from the Order... to the Grand Army of the Republic. Grievous didn't understand, entirely, how that changed anything. But the news services were going wild, and so were his intelligence sources.

"It's unprecedented, General," Clothar Aclinde, exiled Carammite spymaster, said by hologram. "We've heard of Jedi leaving the Republic, you've got three in your service, right now. But leaving the Order so they can directly work for the Chancellor? This changes everything."

"I don't see how," Grievous said. "They're still Jedi scum."

"Well... yes." Aclinde said. He scratched the bald spot on top of his head. "Yes, General, they are. But they're not Jedi Order scum. They're Grand Army of the Republic scum, with Jedi powers."

"Functionally identical!" Grievous said, dropping his fist on his desk. "Is this all you have to report?"

Other underlings were a little more helpful. The Sluissi politician and known civilian, Corlissi Ludar, former Republic Senator and now the Confederate Congress's de facto leader, was able to explain things better:

"General, a split in the Order shakes the balance of power in the Republic to its very foundation. The Republic has always had the Chancellor to wield executive power, the Senate to wield legislative power, the Courts to wield judicial power, and the Jedi to uphold the democratic and non-aggressive values all three branches of government are founded upon."

"Bah! Some job they've done of it."

"My thoughts exactly, General. But in case you weren't paying attention, Palpatine subverted the legislative and judicial branches so thoroughly he could have, in theory, overridden any of the three. Legally. These powers were inherited by Amedda, who was in turn ousted by a vote of no-confidence. Tarkin is, legally speaking, serving out what is still Palpatine's term."

"Shouldn't there be another election?" asked Grievous. Dooku had mentioned that before.

"Well, yes, but actually, no. As we are now in the year 982, the Republic *ought* to be due for an election. Which it hasn't had since *972*. And it won't happen. I've kept my eye on HNN, General, they're not saying a word. Tarkin's here to stay, and he's pulling every lever Palpatine put in place to be sure of that. He has control of the Senator, the Courts, *and* soon he'll have his own rival Jedi Order. I wouldn't be surprised if he's got his hands in the media."

"I envy his power," said Grievous.

The Sluissi bristled. "General, you are not an autocrat. Congress has granted you the power to prosecute the war as you see fit, in accordance with our constitution, but you have no authority over Congress or our private media."

Grievous rolled his eyes. *As if any of you cretins wouldn't fold the moment you had to stare down a blaster barrel, when push came to shove.*

Except, some *hadn't*. Wayne Horthy, Lan Cathida, Wendil of Umbara, even that silly Sephi girl, Lirka Vantiales. Esera Komara might have carried their effort on her back, but they'd been brave enough to go up against the corporate commandos. Perhaps they'd turn on him, if he too betrayed the principles they lived by. That was a troubling thought.

One of the names on the news tugged at his memory. *Ardabur Aspar...* Where had he heard that before?

Grievous's mind took him back to the service hall above Congress's chamber, that winter day in Raxulon. Esera Komara had stood before him, a starved, sick, stick of a girl, trembling in fright, but grasping a tiny flame of anger that gave her just enough courage to lash out at him. "*You're a butcher, you're a murderer, just like Aspar and all the rest! They want me dead, you do too! So just do it already!*"

That defiance, as weak and useless as it had been, born out of desperation and frustration beyond all words, had struck a chord deep within his soul. Even then, a part of him had known. A part of him had recognized. He'd stayed his hand, and in doing so, embraced his destiny.

That this Aspar should appear now, aiding Tarkin... That was no coincidence. Tarkin had Aspar at his side. Grievous had Komara.

Destiny revealed itself.

"The gods are at work again," he told Komara, when he had her on hologram.

"It's two in the morning on my ship," Komara said, rubbing her eyes. "Too early to be talking about gods, Grievous."

"Aspar is on the news."

That name yanked her into full consciousness. "Aspar? Ardabur Aspar?"

"Yes. He's left the Jedi Order. And publicly sworn allegiance to Tarkin. I'm surprised you don't know. This news is half a day old."

"Emberlene is like fifty billion jumps off a main hyperlane," said Komara. "I've been in and out of hyperspace for three days, the computer can barely chart a route. So we've been pretty busy, out in the middle of nowhere."

"Do you think it's worth noting that Tarkin has Aspar, and I have you?" Grievous asked her.

"Yes," she said, bringing a hand to her face. "I think it's worth noting I'm an idiot who should have killed him, because who knows what trouble he's going to get up to now."

Grievous cackled. "This is why we Kaleesh do not take prisoners. Dead men can't cause you trouble in the future."

"No good deed unpunished..." Komara sighed. "Is it wrong that I want a rematch with him?"

"It will happen. As I said, Komara, the gods are at work. You two are exactly where you are for a reason. Be alert. Be righteous." Grievous looked around his tower lair. His doctor was lurking in his medical bay beneath the elevator deck, and no one in the Galaxy had eyes or ears in this chamber but Grievous himself. Still, his recent concern for the supernatural would no doubt raise questions among his more worldly subordinates. They didn't need to know any of this.

"Will do," said Komara. "I doubt Aspar will be turning up at Emberlene, anyhow. I doubt the Republic will even know what's going on out here for weeks. I could conquer the sector and they'd never know until it was all over."

"You are not there to win their war, Komara. You are there to end it. Get in, preserve Emberlene's freedom, and then get out. I've already got your next mission lined up."

"Oh?"

"Zoma V, Hunnoverrs Sector."

"That's Hutt Space..." Komara frowned. "You're taking my contact's warnings seriously already, then?"

"Of course," said Grievous. "Rear Admiral Kronaak was born and raised on Siskeen, he's familiar with the region. But Kronaak does not do diplomacy. People are much more willing to trust a young, attractive Human woman rather than a two and a half meter tall crustacean. Use that to your advantage."

Komara's cheeks darkened in the hologram. Humanoids flushed when embarrassed, Grievous knew, and that made him laugh. "Well, um, I hardly think that'll be possible at Emberlene," Komara stammered.

"No, I think not," Grievous said. "You will need to be more forceful with them. Do not hesitate to act as I would. You are in charge, not them."

"Easier said than done, Grievous."

So, Aspar was back in play. Esera knew that voice anywhere, even if he was unrecognizable behind that plain mask. *A mask, really?* she thought to herself. *Is he* trying *to look as Sith-like as he can?*

Maybe he was. The Sith were not a reality for the vast majority of people in the Galaxy. To the Tionese, the Sith were a symbol of resistance against the Core-centered Republic. To a frustrated and rogue Jedi, the Sith might be a symbol of resistance too.

After all, how many Jedi had met the actual Sith? Qui-gon Jinn and Anakin Skywalker were both dead. That left Kenobi and Yoda as the survivors of Darth Maul and Darth Tyranus. Ahsoka had fought Darth Maul but the Confederacy's spies on Mandalore could not confirm he held any loyalty to the Sith at the time. And no Jedi had ever encountered Darth Sidious *as* Darth Sidious, to Esera's knowledge.

Maybe Aspar was making a statement. Maybe Aspar just wanted to be edgy and mysterious. Maybe someone put him up to the mask, as a more elegant solution to the bandages he'd decided to keep over actually having his face fixed. *Whatever his reasons are, it's stupid,* Esera thought.

It had occurred to Esera that in all the months she'd been aboard *Encounter*, she'd never been further aft than the hangar. There was nothing interesting for organics beyond the hangar, just machinery and long-term storage. Main engineering was typically run from the bridge and a number of damage control stations, the actual reactor chamber automated and staffed only with radiation-resistant droid drones. The hyperdrive was as far back as one could go on the ship, a kilometer behind the bridge. So Esera was surprised to learn Lieutenant Oto and Lieutenant-commander Durm were back there.

Encounter came equipped with a little tram to quickly whisk people and droids from main engineering to the hyperdrive, bundled in amongst the huge conduits running from the reactor to the engines. It was dark, noisy, and dangerous–not to mention, claustrophobic–since it was only a platform with railings and a control panel walled in by pipes on all sides except front and back, but it did its job. She emerged in another place, almost wholly unlit, dominated by the huge bulk that must have been the hyperdrive itself. Oto and Durm were there, at a control panel, wearing headlamps and their engineering jumpsuits. They were the same blue as the uniform, but far more practical in cut and design, rank chords on the sleeves being white sewn-on patches and not embroidered gold thread.

"Not many people come back here," Esera said. Durm and Oto turned and saluted.

"Captain," said Durm.

"Captain. We're investigating some interesting readings," said Oto. "Apparently, this ship's history is classified, so we're trying to piece together what the hell happened here."

"We ran some metallurgy tests," Durm said. "Everything on that side of the chamber has a completely different atomic composition than this side. It's like someone spliced two different ships built from two different material sources together."

"Interesting," said Esera. "What else have you found?"

"The hyperdrive itself is showing some unusual wear patterns," said Oto. "It seems as if a portion of it was out of use for far longer than the rest of it. And scans have detected trace amounts of chronometric particles. Those particles only exist at the boundary of relativistic shields in hyperspace, Captain. There's no reason for them to be here."

"You two know your business," said Esera. "Voyan chose you well."

"Thank you, Captain," both of them said.

"Want to know what happened?"

"You bet your-" Durm caught himself. "You bet we do, Captain.

"Voyan and I had to lose a battlecruiser. I came up with the idea of disabling its relativistic shields and taking them for a spin around a singularity. We got a virus into that battlecruier's computers and took them in. Unfortunately, *our* relativistic shields had a partial failure. The space-time shear was right where you two are standing. I suppose that's where the chron-whatever particles came from." Durm and Oto, both agape at what they were hearing, rapidly moved a meter to the side. "We were twelve kilometers above the event horizon when we got the ship under control again. We burned out the engine, messed up the hyperdrive, tensor fields were failing, reactor seconds from going critical, it was a real hectic time. But Voyan and I pulled through. We got her out into normal space and that battlecruiser's got about fifty one and a half years left in warped space-time. From our perspective. For them, it'll be another twenty nine seconds or so."

"You *what*?" asked Oto, in utter disbelief.

"Captain, I heard this was a naval intelligence vessel," said Durm. "I thought we'd be sitting back and drinking Corellian rum while you did spy stuff. Not diving down black holes to lose tailing battlecruisers."

Esera did her best to smile. "I did say we occasionally entered combat. Ultimately, Voyan replaced the entire engine complex we lost shielding over. I'll save you the trouble of running the same tests on everything ahead of the bow. That's from another ship too. After I rammed the star destroyer *Vigilance* over Zeltros."

The two engineers looked aghast.

"Voyan didn't tell you how many stupid situations Grievous puts us into, that I come up with stupid solutions for?" Esera asked them.

"No, he did not," Oto said. She crossed her arms.

"Well, you should know *naval intelligence* is just a Grievous code word for 'whatever the hell I want you to do today, Komara.' It's always a surprise where you'll be going, working for me... I don't know what's waiting for us at Emberlene. All I know is that there's a war in the Authala sector and we're there to make sure our allies don't lose it... too badly. *Encounter* is once again taking on an entire sector by herself. We've done it once and we'll do it again."

"I've never even heard of the Authala sector," muttered Oto to Durm.

"Expansion Region, that's all I know," Durm said.

The Neimoidian was right. Esera had spent several evenings reading up on Emberlener culture and history. Emberlene existed in the Authala sector, a sector in a part of the Galaxy that the Republic, the Confederacy, *and* the Hutts all claimed belonged to them. In reality, none of the three had any real presence in this overlooked part of the Expansion Region. There was nothing of value there. It took an Emberlene shipyard six months to build a corvette that Kuat, Fondor, Minntooine, or Sluis Van could crank out by the hundreds in that same time. No significant industry, no rare or valuable resources worth the cost of moving extraction gear well off major hyperlanes, and no single planet with a population of over a billion. A dense formation of stars and gravitational anomalies made timely navigation in some areas impossible too, spacers had said. In the grand course of the war, the Authala sector did not matter. But Grievous wanted her to go there and sort things out. He'd sent her a note about Emberlener officers in his fleet being worried about their home, and a recording of their transmission with Rear Admiral Kronaak as he passed through the other week.

The Emberleners were a Human culture, a matriarchy, and a hard matriarchy at that. Unlike Esera's home planet of Stalimur, where the women had unquestioned authority in the home and in the family and the men were the face of authority and commerce to outsiders, the men of Emberlene weren't allowed to do anything at all. They were second class citizens, through and through. The more she read, the more uncomfortable Esera became. She could live in a society like Stalimur, where both sexes had responsibilities and privileges the other didn't, it was fair as long as one was content with the role one had been born into. But beyond some silly fantasies, the more Esera thought about Emberlene, the less appealing their society sounded. While all women of Emberlene were equal, those who spent time in the Mistryl Army or its subsidiary services were more equal than those who didn't. They had the first pick of men, and were allowed multiple men if they'd done enough service. This created a problem for those who did not serve, or more accurately, *weren't allowed* to serve, leaving some unable to find partners. Esera imagined there were lots of lonely, unhappy people on Emberlene, men and women alike.

The customs surrounding this inherent imbalance in their society were going to be a problem, too. Emberleners were proud to the point of arrogance, and paid little heed to foreign cultures. They expected anyone on their planet to behave like one of them. And like in some very strict patriarchal societies Esera had read about, single individuals of the dominant sex were considered nothing but trouble on Emberlene. Esera was *very* much single. But she had a way around it.

She sighed, and decided to get this over with fast. Esera called up Voyan. "Commander, see me in my cabin," she said. "Bring something to drink. Something strong."

"Excuse me, Captain?"

"You're gonna need it." She was too, and that was her real reason for asking.

Voyan duly obeyed, with a bottle of Raxian wine he'd picked up from the galley. "I don't know what's going on, Captain," he said, looking halfway between bemused and uncomfortable, "but if I'm being ordered to bring alcohol to your quarters I'm going to make it an educational experience for my own peace of mind."

"Yeah?"

"This is called crookpine black," Voyan said. "They say the grapes look like crookpines. I've never even seen that kind of tree before, so I can't vouch for that. It's got a very particular taste and you're going to run into it with Raxian nobility. Best get used to it now before you embarrass yourself among the peerage, or worse, insult whoever owns the vineyard it came from."

Thank you for making this less awkward, Voyan, thought Esera, willing the heat out of her cheeks. He poured out a little bit into the glasses that came with the cabin. When Esera took a sip, her face scrunched up. The flavor was bitter, biting, and left a fiery sting in her throat. "Wow," she said, blinking. "That's, uh, strong."

"This is nothing compared to what your home planet produces, so I've read," said Voyan. "Still, better you make that face with me around and not the Grand Prince."

"Alright," said Esera.

"So, Captain, why am I here and why did you want *this?*"

"We're headed to Emberlene."

"The planet of the warrior-women. Sounds exciting."

She couldn't tell if he was being serious or not. "The planet of women with no education about off-worlders and not enough humility to realize not every planet is like theirs," said Esera. She took another sip of the wine. *Damn, that's strong,* she thought. But it gave her the kick she needed to go forward. "I'm going to need you down there with me."

Voyan nodded. "Okay, so what's the catch?"

"Established Emberleners, the ones we'll be dealing with? They don't like young, single women. Like me."

That got a wary look out of her engineer. "I see..."

Now came the part where Esera's face turned red again. "Emberlene is a militarized matriarchy. The women with the most power have access to the most men, leaving too few for the rest... What I'm saying is, unmarried women are untrusted women. And since I've got only one ship backing me up here, I need to ingratiate myself as much as I can with them. So, I need you to come with me to the surface. And, uh... well, you see, I need you to, um-"

"Pretend we're a couple and set the jealous matriarchs at ease," said Voyan. There was that impenetrable stony-faced look, which she'd seen so often in their early days of knowing each other.

"Yeah," said Esera. She downed the rest of her wine. Voyan refilled his glass to the top, and then did the same.

"You're not supposed to drink it like this, but this is what you drive me to do, Captain," he said.

"Sorry."

"It is what it is. If you need me on eye candy duty, it's done."

Esera's blush grew fiercer. "I didn't say that!"

"You're not denying it," said Voyan. "I have my orders, Captain. I will carry them out. Commander Miha Voyan, Confederate Navy, preparing for eye candy duty." He stood, gave a sharp salute, and departed. The bottle of crookpine black wine remained, and Esera took advantage of that. She was sure there was enough steam coming off her to condense and flood her cabin. *Why am I the one feeling embarrassed? He's the one who's going to have eyes on him! Maybe he's a pervert and enjoys this kind of thing...*

"You're going down to Emberlene, huh?" asked Sanya, at breakfast.

"Yeah," said Voyan. "The Captain wants me as eye candy down there."

"*You?* Eye candy?" Zule let out a hearty laugh. "No one's gonna believe that for a second. You're as plain as nutrient paste."

"Do you see any other Human men on this ship?" Voyan asked her. "No, I didn't think so. I'm her only option. It'll get her in with the Emberleners."

"Good luck down there," Sanya said, slapping his shoulder. "You want Alize and I to give you a crash course in looking pretty? Makeup's not just for women, you know."

"We could do it," Alize chimed in, an eager look on her face.

Voyan hid his face in his palms. "No, even I have limits with what I'll put up with."

"That's a shame, we could turn you from average to cute *very* quickly." Sanya put on her best charming smile.

"I'm coming up on thirty one, I'm *not* cute," said Voyan. "I'm an engineer, not a puppy."

"And that's why you're single," Zule told him.

"Shut up, Zule, you've never even kissed a boy. Or a girl, for that matter."

Sanya snickered as the Zeltron's cheeks grew a little darker. "If you want to change that, Zule, I'm always here."

"No, not interested, thank you," Zule stammered.

"Lively ship, huh?" Lieutenant-commander Durm asked Lieutenant Oto.

"Better a bunch of kids fooling around than where I came from, let me tell you," Oto said to him. Oto was in her mid-thirties, Sanya remembered. She and Zule really were children to her.

"Actually, I have an idea," Voyan said, looking at his palms. "Alize, Sanya, I need something for my hands. *Lady* Komara's... consort would not be working on machines for a living. He wouldn't have hands like these."

"Say no more," Sanya said. She and Alize locked eyes; they had him now.

Sanya knew a thing or two about cleaning up from a day's work in the fields, to look her best when hitting up the local nightlife with other young agri-corps members. Alize, a life-long cook, knew these things too. With some help from Esera–negotiated by Alize, since Esera was still being a moody teenager when Sanya was around–they found Human-compatible skin products. A few hours before the ship's resident normal girls, and Voyan's skin was better looking than they'd ever seen it.

"Are you *sure* you don't want makeup?" Sanya asked him.

"Positively sure," Voyan said.

"It'd really soften some of your edges," Alize said. "I *could have* taken care of that already, if you'd just eat everything I served you. Esera does, look how healthy she is. You're going to fall over dead from the first cold you catch."

"Yeah, you're so bony that you're one step up from a Scarif spine snail, you know," Sanya told him.

"Finally, a Jedi who knows about animals!" Voyan sighed. "But rumors of my frailty have been greatly exaggerated. My people have a tendency towards leanness and height. Unfortunately, I only got one of those traits."

"Welcome to the club," Sanya muttered.

"Doctor Erso continually fails to deliver results," Director Krennic's hologram said. "I suggest finding new ways to motivate him. He has a daughter he's very fond of."

"Is that so?" Tarkin didn't let any expression show on his face. Sitting in on the call were Vice Chancellor Sate Pestage, and Janus Greejatus, who had no formal position but was a useful man to have around.

"Furthermore, Erso thinks this Project Stardust is to provide energy for liberated worlds, after the war. He doesn't understand the urgency of his work. I would like to bring him in on the true nature of what he's building for us," said Krennic.

"No," Tarkin said. "The last thing we need is for some bleeding heart egalitarian like Erso to realize he's working on a planet-destroying weapon. Tell him to work harder. Tell him his family might be distracting him. He'll get the hint."

"Yes, my lord," said Krennic, grimacing as he bowed his head. The hologram shut down.

"It'll never be done in time," said Pestage. "Our master expected at least fifteen years for development on the superlaser. You want fifteen months. Quite frankly, Chancellor, I don't see the point. We could win this war in fifteen months with the assets we have now."

Pestage was right. If Tarkin pulled on the right strings he could even dissolve the Senate if he so wished. The war would be over in fifteen months. It was what came after the war that concerned him. "We can win the war, but we can lose the peace," Tarkin sighed. "Once those moron civilians no longer have Grievous and his droid legions scaring them, they'll demand I resign the executive powers of this office and return the Republic to the gridlocked, stagnant mess Sheev Palpatine inherited. I have not come this far to lose everything like that. No, I won't have it! I will win this war, and I will reshape this Galaxy as I see fit."

"Very good, my lord," Janus Greejatus said, smiling. He looked ghastly. "If this technological terror you want to build goes nowhere, there are alternatives."

"Are there?"

Greejatus clasped his hands. "Oh, yes. Our master had back-ups in case the superlaser never worked. But the plans for those were never put into motion. We'd be starting from scratch."

"What do you need?" asked Tarkin.

The Force-sensitive man seemed surprised that Tarkin had agreed so readily. "Our master knew of a certain artifact in the Authala Sector. We will need to retrieve it."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go get it."

"It's not that simple, my lord. It's on the planet Emberlene. The Mistryl Army took it from the Sun Guard two hundred years ago, there's been a grudge ever since... But the point is, my lord, Emberlene has joined the rebels." Greejatus shrugged apologetically.

Tarkin sighed, and pulled out a datapad from his desk. He stamped it with his digital seal of office. "Here," he said, handing it to Greejatus. "I don't care what you have to write on this, bring me that artifact."

Greejatus looked like he'd just been handed a holy object. "Right away, my lord!"

A strange relic from an irrelevant backwater planet like Emberlene was of little interest to Tarkin. There was a one in a thousand chance this thing would be worth the effort Greejatus was about to go through to get it. What could some antique once possessed by a mercenary group could do for the Ultimate Weapon? But if the mysterious Sidious had thought it was worth looking into, perhaps it was. Perhaps that one in a thousand chance would be the chance Tarkin needed to take to get his battle station operational.

The day had been a complete media circus. The Holonet had been lit aflame with the news of two Jedi knights 'defecting' from the Order to enter the direct service of the Chancellor. Obi-wan was well aware that the Jedi Order could not handle the media. Well, Anakin could have, but... *Best not to dwell on that,* thought Obi-wan. Unfortunately, the Order's complete silence on the matter had sent the media into a frenzy of speculation, most of it woefully wrong and damaging to the Order's reputation.

"We need to say *something,*" Obi-wan told Mace Windu, as they walked down the great halls of the Temple.

"It's beneath our dignity," Windu said, scowling out at the city. "We won't disgrace ourselves by gossiping with these *journalists.*" He said that last word like it tasted filthy.

"A statement, Master Windu, not gossip."

Mace Windu frowned, and was quiet for a moment. "I will speak with Master Yoda. But the Jedi have always avoided the media for a reason. The media deals with the weak-minded, we have little to say to such people."

"Well, you're not wrong," Obi-wan sighed.

His next stop was to check in with Master Drallig. And the news was not good there, either. "Thirty-seven Jedi have left the Temple premises," he told Obi-wan, quietly, as they looked at a list of names on the screen.

"Thirty-seven..." For a moment, Obi-wan felt sick. "It really is a schism, then. The first since the Sith Wars..."

"Well, isn't this a Sith war too, Master Kenobi?" asked Drallig.

"No, it's the Clone War."

"They say there's a Sith lord behind this all. One we're hunting."

"You know I can't talk about that," Obi-wan told him.

"That's what I thought." Drallig looked over the data on the monitor. "They're not all knights. Almost half were padawans."

"All Padawans who lost their master in the war..." That sick feeling came back again. Children who'd had their mentors slain, sometimes right in front of them, and shoved off to a total stranger who was supposed to fill that void. Because Jedi didn't grieve, Jedi didn't get sad, Jedi didn't have attachments. Some of the padawans on this list had lost multiple masters in the last three years. The poor boy who'd lost four masters since passing his initiate trials only twenty months ago was on that list. Obi-wan couldn't blame kids like that. Orphaned again and again, no wonder they jumped at a chance to somehow end this war more quickly.

"How many fallen Jedi do you think we'll have by the end of this?" asked Drallig. It was a callous question, but the expression on his face was anything but.

"Too many," said Obi-wan. "Far too many."

That the skull-faced, bone-plated Givin had joined the Confederacy was a tremendous boon, one Kronaak would never be thankful for enough. They were a mathematical people, and hyperspace navigation proved to be an endlessly fascinating challenge for their best and brightest. The Confederate Navy's ex-pirate captains knew many secret routes passed from generation to generation, the corporate private fleet officers had their own obscure ways kept hidden by the company. But the Givin navigator's guild had blazed hyperlane after hyperlane for the Confederacy's raiders. One such lane led into the heart of the Esahnic Nebula. There was nothing special about this nebula, no one had ever charted a hyperlane into it. Until now.

This opaque cloud of dust and gas, located a thousand light years off the Hydian Way in the Inner Rim, was one of several secret Confederate raider bases deep inside enemy territory. The diffuse gas and dust wasn't enough to fool hyperwave sensors; Kronaak's *Sheathipede* shuttle was picking up a dozen ships clustered around a Trade Federation core ship acting as a space station, with an irresponsible amount of fuel storage tanks mounted on spines protruding from its polar axes.

"*Rear Admiral Kronaak, welcome to Station NQ-502903-S. Stand by for docking instructions,*" said the station control.

"Thank you," Kronaak told them. Right away, he knew what kind of station this was. Every raider base reflected its origins. This one was not only made from a Trade Federation ship, it was run by a Trade Federation crew. They'd even kept regulations about not changing the station's name from its serial number without clearance from Federation legal teams. And since this station was top secret, no one would be telling a legal team about it any time soon.

Most raiders were small, corvettes or armed freighters only a few hundred meters long, operated by private owners with letters of marque issued from Raxus. Some of those were here today. Others were military, *Recusant* -class destroyers being a favorite for their acceleration and very high power-to-mass ratio. But one stood out among them all, dwarfing even the station: *Cataclysm.*

The great battleship loomed over everything else, fuel and water lines hooked into the station. NQ-502903-S looked more like the ship, here, and *Cataclysm* the station. Her unpainted silver bulk gleamed in the dim light of the nebula, the only color on her the blue and white Confederate hex roundel. "Magnificent, isn't she?" Kronaak asked.

"Yes, sir, magnificent, sir," agreed Commander OOM-27, a battle droid Naboo veteran that had served Kronaak well all these years. The shuttle approached one of the station's docking bays. As they drew nearer, Kronaak was reminded just how big a core ship was... and got a sense for how incredibly gigantic *Cataclysm* was. The circular launching plate of the ion wave could have hosted a small town on its surface.

Station control transmitted the docking sequence and codes, and the shuttle landed in a hangar that could have been any aboard Kronaak's own *Aethra*. A protocol droid escorted them to an immaculate conference room, where Captain Blox Hatha of *Cataclysm* waited, with his top officers.

Hatha was a big Neimoidian, definitely overweight. The left side of his body had been replaced by heavily-wrought cybernetics, and his long coat had a collar that raised up to his ears. *Cataclysm*'s officers were also a far cry from the prim-and-proper Trade Federation elite Kronaak was used to. They were also battle-scarred, and dressed like their captain. These men looked more like pirates than naval officers. Which they were, probably.

"Rear Admiral Kronaak," said Hatha, in a gritty voice, "Grievous says you've got a mission for me."

"That I do, Captain Hatha," Kronaak said, noting the lack of salute. Yes, they were pirates. "I need transport ships, armed ones, preferably. You can get them for me."

"Wouldn't be hard," said Hatha, leaning back in his seat. It creaked beneath him. "One blast with an ion cannon and the ship's out. Dealing with the crew, however..."

"That's what droids are for," said Kronaak.

"Droids don't come free. Attrition would add up, fast. Especially if you need a lot of ships."

"Then slice into their systems and vent their crews."

Hatha blinked with his one organic eye. "I was told you were Trade Federation, Kronaak."

"I was. But I was born a slave in Hutt Space, and now I serve the Confederacy. I have left the Trade Federation far behind, Hatha."

The Neimoidian pirate smirked, and sat up a little. "Well, this makes me feel a whole lot better. I'll get you those ships, if that's what Grievous wants. But every day I'm not out there messing with their convoys, the Republic's going to have a slightly better position."

"Slights won't matter in a few months," said Kronaak.

Hatha and his officers exchanged a look. "Something big's coming, huh?" asked Hatha. "First the Jedi Order splits, now Grievous is having me fetch transports while the Republic catches its breath..."

"These ships are critical to the Confederacy's survival. And if we happen to take them out of Republic convoys, at least someone on the other side will have a bad day." Kronaak spread his jaws, in his best imitation of a smile.

"I can drink to that," Hatha said. He stood up, and offered an oversized mechanical claw to Kronaak. He clasped it with his own pincer. "Let's go get us some transports, shall we?"

By every right, Lieutenant-commander Durm ought to have command of *Encounter* with both Esera and Voyan going down to the surface. All the ships fighting personnel stood on the bridge, civilian contractors Murshida and Buna included.

"I'm not leadership material, Captain," Durm said again. "I never took the tactical classes or starship command classes. I'm not qualified. According to the Trade Federation manual I'm not even *allowed* on the bridge-"

"This isn't a Trade Federation ship, lieutenant-commander," Esera sighed.

"It isn't," Voyan agreed. "But I think he's right, Captain."

Aren't we supposed to present a united front? Esera wondered, annoyed. Right now, the two of them looked like a Raxian couple of wealth and status. Which was exactly what they were going for. Voyan was looking inordinately trim and proper... the girls probably had gotten their hands on him. Maybe not Zule, but Sanya and Alize, definitely. Esera closed her eyes and put a hand on her temple. "Speak," she said to Voyan.

"Lieutenant-commander Durm is a Neimoidian, Captain. If he hasn't passed the qualification tests for bridge personnel, then he isn't psychologically fit to be bridge personnel. Neimoidian society is rigidly divided into roles like that. I believe Durm *could* run the ship, but he doesn't, and he won't until he does those tests."

"It's true, Captain," Durm said, looking apologetic. "It's one of the worse parts of Neimoidian culture. That's how the big Feddies control us little Feddies, to borrow a Captain Buna phrase."

"Alright, then who is in charge when I'm gone?" asked Esera. "The droids?"

OOM-451 spoke up. "I've been stationed on this ship for several years, Captain. I am capable of command."

"I'd be a lot more comfortable with a person in charge," said Lieutenant Oto, her ears flicking back. *That makes sense,* Esera thought, *she served with Loyalists for a while...*

Klaud made a noise that sounded like a good bantha impression. His antennae curled up, and then spread out, pointing at Buna.

"Our Trodatome friend may be onto something," Murshida said. "Captain Buna *is* a starship captain, and has been for thirty years. She's been running ships almost as long as I was exiled."

The thought of leaving her ship in a pirate's hands made Esera's skin crawl.

"It would be an honor, Captain Jedi," Buna said, as she leaned against the bulkhead. "But I don't know if the Feddies would accept ol' Buna's orders."

"The way I see it, Captain Buna's survived three decades in the Outer Rim. She can't be incompetent," Durm said.

"I agree," said Voyan. "She's got a lifetime of experience, and she's smart enough to know what happens when you cross Grievous. Or you, Captain."

Buna hissed in laughter. "I'm a brave woman. But not that brave."

So, it was settled. Captain Buna, the pirate civilian, held command over a Confederate warship. As *Whirlwind* descended to the green paradise of Emberlene, Esera thought about that. She also thought about what was turning up on their scanners: nothing. Emberlene's orbit was deserted of any ship larger than a sublight transport, fueling up at a station for its next hours or days-long crawl to the outlying planets of the system.

"For a regional power, this planet isn't well-defended," Voyan said, looking over her shoulder at the scanner screen.

"That space station's lasers might give us trouble... for a few minutes." Esera frowned. "Where is everyone?"

Whirlwind was given clearance to land in the capital city, and down they went. Emberlene was as lush as Naboo, but with a tropical flare. Esera saw streamers of mist caught in the towering canopies of forests, winding muddy rivers, and beautiful turquoise lagoons nestled in arms of white sand. This planet was a million times nicer than Caramm, she decided.

But it was hot. Not so hot as Zeltros or Zygerria, but even more humid than either. Stepping off *Whirlwind* felt like stepping into a steam bath. All around the tarmac of the spaceport, there were shallow puddles. Even water in this heat couldn't evaporate because of humidity. Esera was grateful it was overcast; sun would have made this unbearable.

A groundspeeder pulled up, with little black and silver flags fluttering from its forward fenders. Out stepped a slim, middle-aged woman, official-looking in the black uniform of the Mistryl Army. "I am Major Olina Itrura," she said, saluting. "On behalf of Emberlene, let me be the first to welcome the envoy of the Confederacy."

"Thank you," said Esera, at a loss of what to do. *Salute back? Bow? Curtsy?* She settled on a respectful nod. "I am Lady Esera Komara of Raxus. This is-" Esera had to gather her nerves for a moment, "Miha Komara. My... companion." Voyan stood as stony-faced as ever, giving a slight bow of his own. But through the Force, he felt as if he were about to explode in laughter.

"If you'd come with me, I'll take you straight to General Headquarters."

They didn't have a choice. General Headquarters was as lavish-looking as the palace of the Zeltron monarchs in Ibisa, built in white stone, tall windows gleaming, and roofs in red tiles. But the security was evidence that they really were on a totally different world. Speeders with repeating laser cannons and guards in body armor and holding blasters surrounded the place. There were barricades and force field gates barring their groundspeeder's path, and Major Itrura was stopped at no less than three checkpoints on the way in. Finally, they were through, and Itrura stopped at the gates of General Headquarters.

Esera took a good look at the guards. All of these women were large. Not Alize large, in a rounded and motherly way, but Harak Murshida and Captain Buna large, tough-as-nails warrior large. Almost all of them were taller than Voyan, every single one of them was *at least* half a head taller than Esera, if not a full head taller. They were broad and muscular, hard-bodied fighters, each and every one of them. Esera wouldn't want to be caught without her lightsaber if she had to fight these people... The lightsaber that, right now, was on Voyan. Emberleners would search women for weapons, but touching another woman's man was a fast way to start a fight. Esera didn't trust these people not to disarm her. They had such a narrow view of outsiders that they'd treat her like one of them. So, she was gambling that they'd treat Voyan like one of them too.

In moments, Esera walked through a metal detector, and searched for weapons she did not have. "There have been assassination attempts against the Eleven Elders," one of the soldiers told her.

But Esera's hunch was right: she exploited their cultural blind spot. Voyan was escorted around the machine and met her on the other side, untouched and unscanned, though flanked by two absolute slabs of Emberlener soldiers. Admiration and respect flowed from him in the Force towards the two women. *Stupid Voyan,* she thought, *all it takes to impress you is some muscles!* At least she wasn't feeling any *attraction* from him towards the Emberleners. That would have been too much to handle.

"What do you think their work-out routine is?" he asked Esera, quietly.

"Who cares?" Esera hissed back.

"I legitimately do not know if these physiques are achievable for baseline Human women," Voyan went on. "Was there genetic modification? Hormone treatments? Or is it really just plain hard work? Do you think you could ask for me?"

Esera rolled her eyes, and forced away a sudden bout of self-consciousness as she took his arm. She had to signal to every one of these Emberleners that Voyan was off-limits.

"This way, please" Major Itrura said to them, gesturing down an ornate hall. It was lined with the flags, banners, and icons of defeated foes. Each one had a placard detailing when and from whom the trophy was taken. The Mistryl Army had a long and proud tradition of winning. *Until now,* thought Esera. *That's why I'm here.*

An older woman than Itrura met them. Her hair had gone all grey, and her face had deep lines. But her uniform was the most decorated yet. "Ah, Lady Komara," she said, with none of Itrura's deference.

"This is General Taclai," said Itrura. "Eleventh of the Eleven Elders."

"We'll be meeting with the other ten soon," said Taclai. "Once they arrive."

"I thought I was right on time," said Esera. "Has something come up?"

"The council will see you when the council is ready," said Taclai.

Esera hated that she had to look up to meet this woman's eyes. Taclai looked down, her face showing just the slightest hint of smugness. *I came all this way to help them, and they're making me wait!?*

"How was your journey, Lady Komara?" Taclai asked.

"Uneventful, mostly," said Esera. "Your star system is strangely empty. My ship is the only lightspeed-capable ship up there, it seems."

"Your ship?" Taclai gave her a questioning look. "You only brought one?"

"The only one I'll need," said Esera.

The older woman's eyes narrowed, just a little, and Esera knew she'd hit a nerve with a proud woman from a proud race. Not the most tactful thing for a diplomat to do, but if they were going to act snooty to her, she'd give it right back. Esera Komara was done with being humble and nice just to be bullied, derided, and laughed at. If they wanted to play rough, she'd play rough.

"Who is this?" asked Taclai, looking Voyan up and down.

"Miha," said Esera. "He's with me."

"So it would seem. He looks a little old, for a girl your age," Taclai said. "But I shouldn't judge. My sister had a taste for older men, too. Though, I must say, you really could do better for yourself. He's quite plain and thin, isn't he? I could fold him up and carry him away, and I'm not nearly as strong as I used to be."

Esera's face was burning. The Emberlener hadn't just hit back, she'd slammed back. In the Force, Voyan's feelings were nothing but amusement at this entire situation. He didn't feel insulted at all.

"Between you and I, Lady Komara, you may want to spend more time training and less time in the kitchen with your husband," Taclai went on, with a smirk. "I'm sure he's a good cook, but you're looking a little *too* well-fed."

Do I kill her or kill myself? thought Esera, as her cheeks came near the melting point of Human flesh. She was secretly glad she'd left the magnaguards on *Whirlwind,* so that a recording of this conversation would never reach Grievous.

Something beeped, and Itrura took out a holoprojector. She exchanged a few words with another woman. "General, Lady Komara, the council has arrived."

"Oh, good, come along." Taclai gestured for them to follow.

A big smile was trying to fight its way onto Voyan's face, as he suppressed his laughter with every fiber of his being. They followed after the general, Voyan attached to Esera's arm once again.

"This is much more entertaining than I thought it'd be, *Esera*," he whispered to her.

"Don't you say a damn word," Esera said, trying to look as calm as she could despite her humiliation at the hands of the old Emberlener. It didn't work, because at last, that smile broke through Voyan's will. *I'm going to kill you too,* Esera thought.

"You're sweating," Voyan said quietly, back to his usual serious self. "Don't let them get under your skin. You're younger than they are and more powerful, they're trying to psychologically dominate you. This is social politics."

"What do you know about *social politics?* All you do is work on droids and engines!" Esera whispered back.

"I had a normal upbringing. You were raised by celibate zealots who pretended they had no emotions," Voyan told her. "What do *you* know?"

Esera had to think about that. She was still thinking when they came to the conference chamber. Below the raised dais where the Elders sat, a line of guards in dark purple uniforms stood, vibroblades and shockwhips on their hips, alongside blasters. They were more like Zule Xiss in their lean toughness, than the giants around the palace perimeter.

All the Eleven Elders were there, the matriarchs of Emberlene, the commanding generals of the Mistryl Army and admirals of their Armada; Taclai was the youngest of them, the others were white-haired and wrinkled and withered with age, but their eyes were keen and full of energy. Old they might be, but far more dangerous in a non-combat setting than any of the younger, stronger women in this palace. The minds Esera felt behind those aged faces would have made Queen Oyane of Zeltros look like a naive schoolgirl, she was sure. And there was a presence in this room that made Esera's spine crawl.

"One of them is Force-sensitive," Esera whispered to Voyan. "Maybe more. These women are *sharp*."

"This should be good," he muttered. "I'll squeeze your hand if they touch my mind."

"Lady Esera Komara of Raxus," said the oldest of the Eleven. She was ancient, her skin discolored and stretched across her bones, looking tiny and frail compared even to the guards in the room, let alone the huge women outside. But her voice carried strongly across the chamber, and age had not taken its dignity nor its authority. "You stand here summoned by the Eleven Elders of the People, to honor our alliance with the Confederacy of Independent Systems."

"Here I stand," said Esera.

"We are to understand you brought *one* ship?" asked the eldest, leaning forward and peering down her long nose.

"Yes. *Encounter* will be more than enough to take on your foes, should they make it past your own fleet."

"What of your droid army?"

"I don't have a personal droid army," Esera said. "I have several hundred security droids on my ship, plus my ship's marine complement. I am not here to conquer the sector for you. I am here to bring about a suitable end to your war."

There was murmuring among the Elders. They did not like hearing that. "This is not in accordance with our alliance," said one of them.

"Our alliance is one of mutual defense. Emberlene did not attack her neighbors until after she pledged loyalty to the Confederacy. I cannot win the war *you began* now that you've lost this gamble, and I hope you can understand that I only have the power to end your war with your sovereignty intact. Your expeditionary corps has acquitted itself with great honor in the fight against the Republic. I should hope I find that same honor here."

No, they did not like hearing that at all. General Taclai outright sneered at her. *Take that, you smug-* Esera threw every insult she'd learned from her master, from Voyan, and from Zule Xiss at the woman. In her mind.

"Is this how that ghastly alien machine insults us?" asked another of the Elders. "With a useless envoy?"

"Grievous is as crafty as he is ferocious," said the eldest Elder, raising a gnarled, bony hand, silencing her juniors. "Lady Komara's presence is a calculated choice."

"A choice to throw us to the wind," said General Taclai. "He does not respect us! He sends this plump little Raxian girl to mock us and force us to bow to our enemies!" Esera's face went red again. *Plump!?*

"I suggest you recall your fleets and armies," Esera said. "Give up your conquests, consolidate your forces, negotiate from a strong position."

"As if a girl like you knows anything about war," said yet another of the Elders.

"She can't be more than twenty," one said. "What's she ever done with her life?"

"Foreign women are soft and stupid," Taclai said. "This Lady Komara is no different. I say we take her hostage and demand Grievous send us an army!"

Now, things were getting serious. Esera took a deep breath. "I advise against that," she said.

General Taclai crossed her arms. "What could you possibly do to stop us? You wear a dress and come before us unarmed. You can't fight."

Esera stared her straight in the eyes. "You may test that assumption at your convenience, General."

The chamber was silent. A challenge on Emberlene was no trifling matter. *Oh, Esera, what are you doing?* she asked herself. But she knew. This is what Grievous would have done. Sometimes, violence was the only language that got through to people. And it was better to fight than to be a victim.

But before Esera could reflect any further, Voyan squeezed her hand. The Force-sensitive had tried to enter his mind. Esera opened her mouth, but then it hit her. It was as if her very mind had been caught in a vice, and was drilling into her. She grit her teeth, and saw Voyan's jaw had gone tight and his knuckles were white, as he squeezed her hand so hard it hurt. The eldest Elder was looking at both of them with cool interest. *So, it's you,* Esera thought, narrowing her focus on the old woman like a laser.

Yes, it's me, the woman told her through the Force. The pain was gone, Voyan's grip eased into nothing. And then the Eldest broke the silence: "Lady Komara has invited you to a duel, General Taclai." Taclai stared for a moment, in disbelief, and the eldest Elder smiled coldly. "Surely, you're not afraid of this *plump little Raxian girl*?"

"Of course not," said Taclai, standing up. Esera took note of the woman she was facing down. General Taclai was in her later fifties, maybe early sixties, assuming she'd taken no life-extending medical measures. She still had strength in her, but she didn't match up to the lean warriors in purple, standing silently, nor the soldiers outside. This would be an incredibly unfair fight... and Esera didn't care. Taclai shed her uniform jacket with its medals, leaving her in a plain shirt, trousers, and durasteel-toed combat boots, and took a vibrosword from one of the warriors.

"Miha, my weapon," said Esera, holding out her hand. Voyan took her lightsaber out from inside his jacket, and gave it to her.

"Crush her, Esera," he said, in a low voice.

"Like you even need to tell me."

The appearance of the lightsaber gave the eldest a start, insofar as a slight lean forward could be called a start. Taclai looked at it curiously. These people had never seen a Jedi in their lives, Esera imagined. Holonet reception was so bad that audio-only transmissions were the norm here... when they got through. Not even the Republic's propaganda reached this planet. Voyan backed off to the edge of the chamber, giving a cautious glance at one of the purple-clad warriors he ended up beside.

"You're going to fight wearing *that?*" Taclai asked.

"Yes," said Esera. *I'm going to humiliate you, and I'm going to do it in a Raxian lady's dress and high heels,* she thought.

Taclai gave her a contemptful glare. She activated her vibrosword; it hummed with energy, its edges blurred from its oscillations too fast for the Human eye to see. Esera switched on her lightsaber, the green blade leaping out, and a collected gasp sounded throughout the room.

The Emberlener made the first move, but she did not rush in like Zule Xiss would have. Taclai darted in, sword's point out before her, diving towards Esera. Esera slashed out with her lightsaber, expecting to slice the weapon in half, but the green blade bounced off and nearly a jarring reverberation went up Esera's left arm.

Phrik alloy, she thought, recognizing the feeling from her training matches with Grievous and his magnaguards. So, the Emberleners had known the danger of lightsabers at some point. They might not have recognized a Jedi, but they were ready for them.

Esera's surprise was not lost on Taclai. She smirked. General Taclai was taller, her arms and legs were longer, and she was *not* dressed for diplomacy like Esera was. Already, Esera regretted not going barefoot for this fight, but it was too late now. She put her faith in the Force, that the four centimeter heels weren't going to throw off her footwork completely. *Smooth and steady,* Esera told herself, falling into the Form Two patterns Grievous had taught her. The patterns Darth Tyranus had taught him.

The Emberlener style was not like Form Two. Taclai fought aggressively, she was the one pushing forward in this fight, as Esera swerved and dodged out of her reach and around her sword. *It's just like fighting Aspar,* thought Esera, *but she's not nearly as strong, nor as energetic.* Taclai went after her with the spirit of a young woman, but Esera would easily outlast her stamina. That wasn't how she wanted to win this fight. It was time for her to apply Grievous's lessons in full, and show this arrogant Emberlener just who she was dealing with.

Taclai came in with another thrusting attack, Esera slid out of its way, but instead of throwing herself back, she lunged forward, inside the vibrosword's length. The Emberlener's eyes widened in the fraction of a moment she had to register what her foe was doing, but she recovered like the trained warrior she was. Esera saw the fist swinging at her, and started rolling her right shoulder away. She ignored the glancing hit; she had Taclai where she wanted her. Esera hooked her leg behind Taclai's and kicked backward, sending the older woman to the floor. Taclai raised her sword just as Esera's lightsaber came down, and she scrambled to get back on her feet. But Esera didn't let up. She jabbed in again, and again, until Taclai's focus slipped, and Esera had knocked her down again. She brought a foot down on Taclai's wrist, and held her blade just a few centimeters from the Emberlener's neck.

No one in the chamber moved.

"Was this a fight to the death, General Taclai?" asked Esera.

"Go ahead, kill me, see what happens. Your fancy lasersword won't save you here," Taclai spat. Someone else might have mistaken that for bravado, but Taclai was truly not afraid to die. She was *mad*. Her pride had been insulted, and then thrown to the floor, literally. *She'd rather die than be dishonored,* Esera realized.

"That won't be necessary, Lady Komara," the Eldest said, from somewhere behind them. "You're not as soft as you look. You've made your point."

"How did she get that weapon in here?" asked one of the other Elders.

"Her... husband carried it, and the guards didn't check him," said the Eldest. She saw through the ruse, at least. "This girl's got a brain in her head after all. She won't kill without reason, she can keep her lasersword."

"Thank you," said Esera. But she didn't have any pockets on her dress, nor a belt, so she ended up handing her weapon back to Voyan to hold. Taclai slunk away, scowling, and did not rejoin her comrades on the dais. Esera caught her breath, and spoke once more, in as calm a voice as she could. "Now, shall we resume our business?"

"We shall," the Eldest said.

"Good," Esera said. "You've managed to get an entire sector's worth of planets to put aside their differences and pool their resources to hire enough mercenaries to turn the tide of this war. If you all would prefer I leave you to the fate awaiting rich planets conquered by mercenaries, I can. Or I can stay, and find a less damaging end to this war. The choice is yours. But I warn you, I won't put up with more nonsense like Taclai gave me."

"You will stay," said the Eldest. "My juniors are proud women, you must forgive them for their attitude."

No, thought Esera, though her diplomat's instinct to simply nod prevailed. "If your enemies do not want to negotiate, I have the force capable of bringing them to the table. I would like to know the current strategic situation."

"Of course," the Eldest said, turning to a servant.

"Bring out the holoprojector."

One of the Elders took over, who Esera learned was a certain Admiral Lidelia. Two years ago, Emberlene had set out on a conquest of the Authala Sector. Against them formed the Authala Alliance, which received defeat after defeat at the hands of the Mistryl Armada. Esera didn't think it was much of an armada at the height of its power, only a few hundred ships, none larger than a cruiser. But now, the Armada wasn't even that. The Authala Alliance had hired mercenaries. Foremost among them were the Sun Guard of Thyrsus, who, like the Raxian nobles, were descendants of the retainers of Sith lords in ancient times. And the Sun Guard had real warships, made by Kuat, equal matches for Emberlene's home-built Armada. Corvettes and frigates they might be, but Esera recognized the profiles displays. She'd served in battlegroups that deployed such ships. If anything was going to be a threat to *Encounter* around here, it'd be the Kuati frigates.

The Alliance and its mercenaries had spent the past half-year pushing back the Emberleners, and one by one, the planets they'd conquered were liberated. The Sun Guard demanded a heavy price, but no price was too great for freedom. Esera had learned that time and again from Separatists and Loyalists alike. Emberlene now only held its titular home system, and the nearest system with an inhabited planet, Juandomar, forty light years away. On a main hyperlane, that distance could be crossed in the blink of an eye. Out here, that was a three day voyage. And Emberlene had lost contact with the Armada's communication ship and all of Juandomar two days ago.

With the fleet presumed lost, Emberlene would be at the mercy of the Alliance and its hired guns. But none of the Elders even uttered the word *surrender*. They would cast their own world into the fire to save their own pride. It made Esera sick. *I've come just in time to save these horrible people,* she thought. *They don't care they could get millions of their citizens killed, they just want to save face any way they can.*

She called Captain Buna up after the meeting. "You're going to need to hold off an entire mercenary fleet, Buna," she said.

"Aye, Captain," said Buna's little hologram. "I've been checkin' out your ship, she's packin' a hell of a wallop. They won't know what hit 'em!"

"Do what it takes to stop them. You may be the only line of defense this planet has."

Major Itrura, Esera and Voyan's escort to their guest suite in the residential wing, looked surprised. "You can get hologram transmissions from orbit to work, Lady Komara?"

"Yeah," said Esera. "You can't?"

"We can barely talk to other star systems without our communication ships," said Itrura. "We had to use one of our last two to contact that battleship of yours that passed through here a few weeks ago. It was a suicide run, they were destroyed hours later by the Sun Guard."

"They didn't die in vain," Esera said. "I'm here to stop this from going any further."

"Between the two of us, I'm glad," said Itrura. "I've got a husband and three children. I don't want them dying for something they had no part in."

"Three kids? I wouldn't have guessed." Esera gave Itrura's slender waist and narrow hips a glance, and remembered how round her sister had gotten after only two children.

"We don't do natural births here, if that's what you're thinking," said Itrura. "We use womb-tanks. It's a much more hygienic and convenient process."

"Ah," said Esera. Voyan had raised an eyebrow, so she gave him permission to speak. "Do you have something to say, Miha?"

He did, but he spoke in a voice with an accent she'd only ever heard hints of before. His voice was coming from higher up in the throat, and wasn't so sharp as the Raxian accent Esera had come to regularly speak in. "I've read that womb-tanks have a seventy-percent rate of failure, Major Itrura."

"Seventy six percent," said Itrura. "The three children are the ones who survived the nine months in the tank and the transition to independent operation. Eight others didn't." She could have been speaking about an insect colony, for how little she seemed to care.

"Only the strong survive, then?" Voyan guessed.

"Exactly. You have an attentive husband, Lady Komara. He's much sharper than the average male."

Esera wanted to crawl into a corner and die. In the Force, the glow of mirth surrounding Voyan earlier was gone, though. He wasn't happy. "I wouldn't call him attentive," Esera said. "He can be as insufferable and ignorant as any man."

"Of course, that's their nature," Irtura agreed, nodding. "We've spent several centuries trying to weed out the undesirable aspects of the male psyche, but it hasn't been easy. Our ancestors *thought* they wanted perfectly submissive, compliant husbands, and that's what they engineered. But that turned out to be very boring, apparently. So that stock was liquidated and we went back to old fashioned selective breeding. The program's been under way for a few hundred years now, and it's showing results. But we have a long way to go."

The eugenics program on Emberlene was not something Esera had read about. But it fit perfectly with what she knew of this culture. Itrura escorted them into the guest suite, and a servant brought their luggage from *Whirlwind.*

Esera brought a finger to her lips, and traced out the word *bug* in the air. Her engineer-roleplaying-as-husband nodded, and then got into his single suitcase. He took out a scanner, and started sweeping the room. That the Emberleners thought Esera was alone here with a helpless husband worked to her advantage. No one was paying attention to Voyan. They didn't need to know she'd brought a man trained in anti-corporate espionage and computer systems by the Trade Federation. After a few minutes, Voyan returned with his prizes, and dropped them before her like a hunting beast returning to his mistress.

"These two we were supposed to find, they were very obvious. These three, I don't think we were," he said. He was back to his normal voice, faux-Raxian sharpness littered with Zeltron twang and low-caste Niemoidian gruffness, quirks Esera hadn't fully been aware of until now. "Paranoid people, these Emberleners..."

"Is that all of them?"

"I think so."

Now Esera let herself sit down, and relax. Voyan fell into a chair too, and voiced his thoughts:

"You always take me to the nicest places, Esera. These people... they make it all sound so clinical. Infants dying? Failure to *transition to independent operation*. Genetically engineered toys too boring? The *stock was liquidated*. It's a planet full of Khans!"

Voyan was one to talk about being clinical. *This place got to him fast,* Esera thought. "You were having fun when we first got here," she said.

"I admit, it's fun to see you on the spot," Voyan said. "But reality's set in. This place is awful, and it's full of awful people."

"Yeah, I don't like it any more than you do. Emberlene is awful. It's hot and sticky and full of terrible people who are far too full of themselves. I have half a mind to take off and let them get what's coming to them."

"Anyone who says Human women are inherently nicer by virtue of their sex should see this place," Voyan said, putting his head in his hands. "This reminds me way too much of home. Keep your head down, do as you're told, never step out of line or they'll *liquidate* you, and life is cheaper than a deathstick- I hate it. I really do."

Home. Lirra. Voyan didn't talk about that place often. "And they're not even aliens," Esera said.

"Go figure, the worst place I've been in recent times is inhabited by my own kind," said Voyan. "I guess it wasn't the Hutt cartels oppressing us, it'd have been our own rulers. Is there no justice in this galaxy?"

"Not often," sighed Esera. "Are you willing to reconsider your alleged anti-alien prejudices, Miha?"

Voyan looked up. She'd expected him to be unamused, or annoyed, but all she got was uncertainty. "I've got no idea what I believe in anymore," said Voyan, before a thoughtful expression came across his face. "Well, maybe one thing."

"What's that?"

"I'll tell you another time. I think we'd better rest up while we can, things could become very hectic here, very fast."

Esera hoped he was wrong, but the Emberlener fleet could return at any moment, and the Authala Alliance and their mercenaries right behind them. And then there was the question of the Force-sensitive elder... it was certain Esera wasn't finished dealing with that woman yet.

"That's right, Klaud," said Lieutenant-commander Durm, "put the wire in there, and twist it around real neat- perfect."

Klaud made a noise. Possibly one of satisfaction. Sanya couldn't tell yet. But she'd just watched the ungainly Trodatome repair a delicate computer board using his facial antennae. *That* was interesting.

"The commander was right, this guy *is* useful," said Lieutenant Oto.

Another Klaud noise.

"Well, Miha- um, Commander Voyan thought all of you would be useful in your own way," said Zule. "I'm not surprised that's true."

"Well, thank you all for fixing up my computer," said Sanya. "Your vegetables will continue to grow on schedule."

"How much do you want to bet this is the most interesting thing we'll do this week?" asked Durm.

"I'll take it," Oto said. "Captain Buna said this system's as quiet as can be. Ensign Xiss, you in?"

"No." Zule crossed her arms. "You haven't been on this ship as long as I have been. Komara's got a nose for trouble. I'm sure she'll bring hell down on us one way or another."

Sanya nodded. "She's probably right. There's a war in this sector."

"The whole Galaxy is at war-" Durm began to say, but the ship's intercom came on.

"*All hands, report to the mess hall,*" Buna's gravelly voice said. "*I got an announcement for you lot!*"

"See?" said Zule, pointing at the speaker.

While Alize worked on lunch behind the galley counter, everyone else gathered around Buna, acting captain of *Encounter*. "I just got done talkin' with Komara," Buna told them. "We got trouble incomin'. Big trouble. The Emberlener fleet got its teeth kicked in over Juandomar, probably 'bout three days ago. Hyperlanes 'round these parts are a right mess, so the first survivors will probably be turnin' up in a few hours from now. And that means the enemy ain't far behind."

"Told you," Zule whispered to her superiors.

"Told you, *sir,*" Durm whispered back.

"This ain't any enemy, either," Buna told them. "We're up against the Sun Guard. Ever heard of 'em?"

"Sun Guard, Captain?" asked Zule. "They're descended from Sith warriors."

"Reliable mercenaries, Captain," Durm said. "We did business with them in the Trade Federation days. They never failed to uphold a contract. Though they didn't have much of a care for avoiding collateral damage."

"Sun Guard ain't flyin' in local corvettes like these Emberleners or that so-called Authala Alliance. We're goin' up against Kuati durasteel. I want everyone, and I mean everyone–yes, you too, Alize! I see you peekin' back there!–to be ready for this fight. Know where the pressure suits are, know where the survival capsules are. We're gonna be takin' damage before this mission ends, mark my words. All non-essential activities are hereby suspended 'til further notice. Eat what Alize gives you, do your jobs, make sure this entire ship is runnin' at one hundred and ten percent, if you get what I mean, then go to your cabins and rest. Even you two civvies. Talk on the comlinks if you need to."

"What about cleaning the kitchen?" asked Alize, from the galley.

"That's an essential duty," said Buna, completely serious.

"You're damn right, it is."

Sanya was glad someone could take the situation lightly. She'd never been in a space battle before. For most of the war, Sanya had been far behind the front lines, even on planets where fighting was happening. She'd shot a few droids, ridden a few speeders, seen Obi-wan Kenobi and Grievous fight what felt like a lifetime ago, but space battles? Never. Eating lunch was hard, she was *almost* too nervous to have an appetite. But Alize's cooking was just that good.

Before everyone went to their cabins, Buna pulled Murshida aside. "I fought these mercs before, Murshida," she said in a voice she must have thought was quiet, though Sanya could hear her plainly. "We gotta be ready for anythin'. I want you leadin' the droids in case things get *real* nasty, you got that?"

"I can do this," Murshida said. "I take no pleasure in combat but I will defend this ship and its crew."

"All I ask," said Buna, slapping a hand on his shoulder. The old Skakoan was the only person on the ship who could take that without being staggered by the force of impact.

Sanya too got pulled aside. "You're shakin' again, little Devaronian," Buna said.

"Yeah, I'm a little on edge," stammered Sanya, trying to smile. "Never been in a space battle before."

"You remember when you hit me?"

"Uh, yeah," said Sanya.

"I didn't have no thoughts 'bout harming your plants, little one. These Sun Guard, they'll torch 'em all just to spite you." Buna gave her a flat stare, a deadly cold in her reptilian eyes. "I want you to remember when you hit me, if you're up against 'em. Ain't nothin' wrong with bein' afraid. But fear ain't your master, is it?"

"No. No, it's not." Sanya swallowed, and took a deep breath. It was weird how Buna could channel both a pirate's irreverence and a Jedi master's wisdom at the same time. But Sanya *did* remember hitting Buna. She *could* overcome her fear. And if she had to, she *would*.

The clock ticked down, to a zero hour no one knew.

Author's world-building rambling:

Sorry about the delay everyone, this chapter needed a *huge* restructuring once I realized it had hit 20K words. And then it needed another restructuring after consulting with my beta reader Corshy (thanks G, you're a real one). Much was cut, much was rewritten to be tighter, some scenes had to be added for plot reasons that won't be clear until later. A lot of cut content (schism plot, Grievous plot, Sanya plot/space battle) has been moved to the next chapter, making this entire story one chapter longer than intended... I'm sure that count will grow. Let's talk about Emberlene, because male writers trying to portray female-dominated societies can lead to controversy, so I want to make some things clear.

Emberlene has been a very interesting culture for me to develop. In some old Star Wars books, it's a planet of sexy warrior women with energy whips who have a chip on their shoulder because the Empire allegedly wrecked their planet (it was their neighbors who they tried to conquer). This was since retconned into a Clone Wars event, and I've extended the timeline on that a bit. We're always told about the Clone Wars being fought on many levels, from the grand galactic clash you read about and catch glimpses of in ROTS, to the skirmishes and special missions you see in TCW, to even low-level cripple fights. Emberlene vs the Authala sector is one of the few Clone Wars cripple fights to have any detail at all in Star Wars, and I wanted to dive into it. It's like the Ethiopia-Somalia war in space. We'll see that later.

Anyways, about Emberlene itself. This is not a feminist planet. This is a hard-line matriarchal planet. They treat their men like the Taliban (a hard-line patriarchy) treat their women. Does Timewatch hate women, is he pulling a Robert Jordan and projecting his misogyny into his writing? No, not at all, Timewatch just believes women have equal potential. ASD is all about diversity (of terribleness) and equal opportunity (to be terrible). The portrayal of Emberlene here is how I imagined a militaristic, female-dominated society would work. The elephant in the room is pregnancy, and Human pregnancy (unlike, say, wolf pregnancy, or leopard pregnancy) doesn't lend itself to a militaristic lifestyle, due to an evolutionary arms race between the mother and the fetus that I won't get into. Therefore, the women of Emberlene use womb-tanks. The Kaminoans have these, otherwise they couldn't grow the clone army, but otherwise, this technology doesn't really seem to be around in Star Wars on a wide level. It's a massive societal game-changer, on the same level as agriculture and industrial mechanization. Widespread and reliable artificial wombs, allowing for absolute and final control over reproduction with easy access to genetic screening would be a third revolution in human civilization, I think. And because I think this, the ones the Emberleners have are not reliable. Otherwise Padme would be using one of these to keep Luke and Leia safe before they're born, while she does retard stuff like getting held at gunpoint by Separatists on the snowboarder paradise Banking Clan planet that replaced Muunilinst (season 5 had to be less than 9 months before ROTS, right?) or go chasing emotionally unstable Sith lords to lava moons, with no risk to the unborn children. The Emberleners would rather have a 37% infant survival rate than have to deal with natural body births. This says a lot about their society. And I won't spell out why, for once (Valued Reviewer and Fellow CIS Author ZakoBattleDroid will tell you, whenever he has time for reviewing again).

And now, to address some comments from my Valued Reviewers I think are worth a public answer. I'm glad everyone's very excited to see the Jedi schism beginning, I see some interesting predictions I won't address, and I'm sorry the schism isn't the focus of this chapter for above mentioned reasons. Ms. Sleepy Clover asks, "Also what's the point of adding these minor characters if we are gonna rarely see them?" Well, Ms. Clover, as much as I admire C. J. Cherryh and wish I could write as cleanly and tightly as she does, I'm not her, I believe in having *some* details in my character's POVs. A guest suggested I post this story on spacebattles dot net. I have had some incredibly unpleasant interactions with some incredibly unpleasant spacebattles users in the past, I'm not touching that place with a 39 and a half foot pole. Someone else suggested An Archive Of Our Own. AO3 is infinitely superior to this ancient, decaying website, but I have a feeling the heart of Reylodom on Earth won't have much of an appetite for a story like this. I'd also have to go and comb all the pre-Corshy chapters for the masses of errors and typos in them if I post it somewhere else, and I'm lazy.

< Prev | 43. Chapter 43: Embers in the Dark | Next >

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